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ABSTRACT

The National Transition Demonstration Study was conducted to provide information about the implementation and impact of a federally funded program to enhance early public school transition of former Head Start children and their families by extending Head Start-like supports through the first 4 years of elementary school. The study design involved random assignment of schools to a Transition Demonstration group or to a Comparison group. A total of 7,515 former Head Start children and families participated in the study in 1992-1993 and 1993-1994. Key features of the program related to parent involvement, educational enhancement, family social support, health and nutrition, and close collaboration between public schools and Head Start programs. Findings indicated that local programs varied tremendously in how successfully they implemented services. Distinctive characteristics of the most successful programs included their positive relationship between public schools and Head Start; their highly committed, competent, and respected leadership; and a successful record of creating strong partnerships. Educational enhancement was found to be the most challenging area to implement fully. Former Head Start children showed good progress in reading and mathematics during their first 4 years of school, with largest gains in the first 2 years. By the end of second and third grade, they performed at the national average, with both treatment conditions exhibiting the same pattern of positive academic achievement. Children's social skills were rated at close to national averages. Demonstration classrooms showed some significant, although small, differences in characteristics and transition supports relative to Comparison classrooms. Many families in both groups

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steadily decreased in their need for public assistance. All demonstration sites reported that they strongly valued the program, and many instituted aspects of the program for continuation beyond the funding period. (KB)

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Head Start

Research & Statistics

Head Start Children's Entry into Public School: A Report on the National Head Start/Public School Early Childhood Transition Demonstration Study

Submitted to:

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Federal Project Officer

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE NATIONAL HEAD START – PUBLIC SCHOOL EARLY CHILDHOOD TRANSITION DEMONSTRATION PROJECT

In 1990, the U. S. Congress authorized a major program designed to enhance the early public school transitions of former Head Start children and their families. Former Head Start children, like many other children living in poverty, were at risk for poor school achievement. This new program was launched to test the value of extending comprehensive, Head Start-like supports "upward" through the first four years of elementary school. This project, administered by the Head Start Bureau of the Administration on Children, Youth, and Families, funded 31 local Transition Demonstration Programs in 30 states and the Navajo Nation from the 1991-92 school year through the 1997-98 school year and involved more than 450 public schools.

The National Transition Demonstration Study was conducted to provide information about the implementation of this program and its impact on children, families, schools, and communities. The study design involved random assignment of schools to a Transition Demonstration group, which received additional supports and staff funded by this project, or to a Comparison group. A total of 7,515 former Head Start children and families were enrolled in the National Study in 1992/93 and 1993/94. Thousands of other children and families, however, participated in the Transition Demonstration Program, since supports and educational enhancements were offered to all children and families in the classrooms.

KEY FEATURES OF THE TRANSITION DEMONSTRATION PROGRAM

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The 31 local Transition Demonstration Programs all implemented major programs related to:

1. parent involvement activities;
2. educational enhancement, especially to promote use of developmentally appropriate practices and continuity in children's educational experiences;
3. family social support services; and
4. health and nutrition.

Examples of highly valued activities from local Transition Demonstration Programs:
- creating Parent Resource Rooms in children's elementary schools
- making home visits to families
- sending special newsletters to families about school and community activities
- teaching families about home-based learning supports to help their children succeed

The Transition Demonstration Programs also sought to achieve close collaboration between public schools and Head Start programs. As required, each local program established a Governing Board comprised of at least 51 percent former Head Start parents and hired Family Service Coordinators (1 per 35 families) to assist families and promote parent involvement. In addition, most local sites had plans for:

- promoting the inclusion of children with disabilities into regular classrooms;
- addressing cultural and linguistic diversity and appreciation; and
- developing individualized transition plans for each child.

Local programs were designed to be responsive to community needs and evolved over the seven years of implementation. From the start, local sites varied tremendously in terms of the willingness of their schools and communities to enact major changes, as well as their previous experience in conducting large-scale, multi-pronged, school-based partnership programs.

LOCAL PROGRAMS VARIED TREMENDOUSLY IN HOW SUCCESSFULLY THEY IMPLEMENTED SERVICES AND SUPPORTS

Local Transition Demonstration Programs facilitated:
- better access to needed social and health services
- greater awareness of community supports and gaps in the service delivery system
- parents becoming active in governance and educational improvement
- local commitment to ensuring the school success of former Head Start children
- new local partnerships or collaborations to benefit young children and their families

Overall, the program implementation data (based on annual site visits, review of program documentation, and reports of participating families, teachers, principals, and Family Service Coordinators) support four major findings:

1. All sites encountered multiple obstacles and barriers in their efforts to provide comprehensive and well coordinated supports to children, families, and schools.
2. Highly competent and stable leadership exerted a powerful influence on the strength and implementation of a local program.
3. Only about 20% of the sites implemented very strong programs. Of the 31 local sites, 6 were rated as very good to excellent in all features of their program, while 8 were judged as fair or weak in all aspects. The majority of local programs (17, or 55%) showed a combination of strengths and weaknesses in their programs and most fluctuated in how well they implemented different features over the years.
4. Many features of the Transition Demonstration Programs were highly valued by schools and families, leading to plans for continuation after program funding ended. In addition, these features were adopted by many of the Comparison schools and supported through re-allocation of resources or external funding.

Collectively, these schools, Head Start programs, and communities strongly endorsed the value of outreach efforts to families and the need to address young children's needs during their early years of transition to school.

HOW THE MOST AND LEAST SUCCESSFUL PROGRAMS DIFFERED

Some of the distinctive characteristics of the 6 most successful local programs were:

1. their strong, positive relationships between the public schools and the Head Start programs;
2. their highly committed, competent, and respected leadership within the programs; and
3. a successful track record of creating strong partnerships to implement and to evaluate large-scale programs.

An interesting and unanticipated feature of these successful sites was that they tended to have the most "competition" from local Comparison schools. That is, the Comparison schools often launched programs similar to the Transition Demonstration Program. These sites also evidenced widespread local commitment to improving the school adjustment of former Head Start and other low income children, as well as to increasing parent involvement and to improving family well-being.

In the 8 sites where implementation was the least successful, at least 6 were plagued by multiple local conflicts, including personality and agency clashes. The leadership for these sites also was less involved, less experienced, and less skillful in training and supervising program staff and in working effectively with school and community personnel. These least successful sites tended to have very high rates of poverty in their school districts, although several highly successful sites had equally high poverty levels. A few of the grantees with early and serious problems identified in the planning year-- especially major conflicts among the participating partners and failure to develop program plans considered minimally adequate by the funding agency --were among those that implemented the weakest Transition Demonstration Programs.

Features which did ***not*** reliably distinguish which sites would be the most or least successful were: the

location of the school district (rural, suburban, urban, or inner city); the average per pupil expenditures in the local school districts; the proportion of local, state, and federal funding to the local schools; whether the program was administered by a Head Start program, a school district, or a combined Head Start/school district grantee; the amount of annual funding from ACYF for the local program; the size of the local program (number of participating schools, families, and children); or the quality of the original grant application.

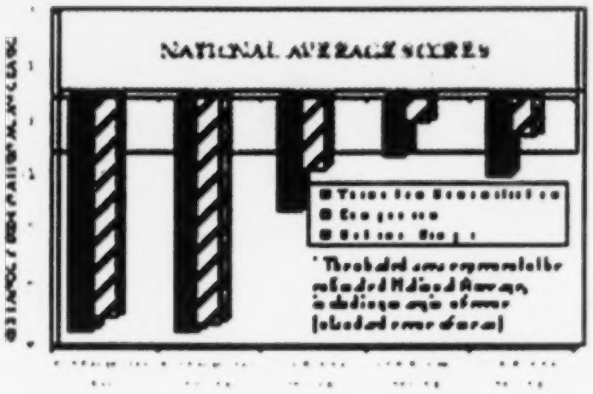
EDUCATIONAL ENHANCEMENT WAS THE MOST CHALLENGING AREA TO IMPLEMENT FULLY

In terms of ensuring that classrooms offered developmentally appropriate and individually tailored instruction, many of the local programs encountered resistance and most did not fully achieve their goals. The reasons for this were many, including reluctance and ambivalence on the part of some teachers and/or some schools and school districts to adopt proposed changes and the fact that many schools already had implemented their own version of "developmentally appropriate practices." In other schools, educators judged these practices to be of uncertain merit and not yet proven; accordingly, they were less willing to make certain types of changes in classroom organization and instructional approaches. One of the strongest findings was that even within the same treatment condition in a local site, there was tremendous variation in the educational practices observed in different classrooms. The importance of individual teachers' skills and educational approach was apparent, as was the impact of the principals' commitment to educational excellence and ongoing improvement.

FORMER HEAD START CHILDREN SHOW GOOD PROGRESS IN THEIR READING AND MATH SKILLS

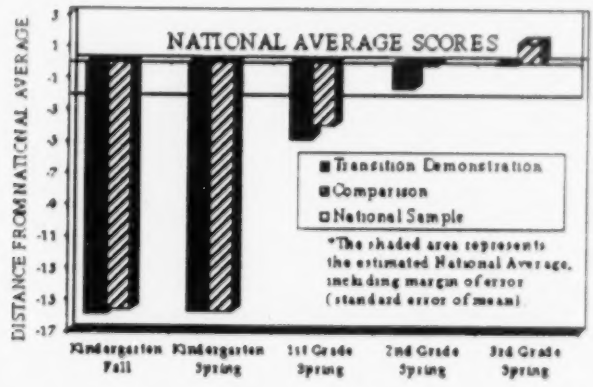
These former Head Start children, on average, showed good academic progress in the first four years of public school, with their largest gains in the first two years. When they entered kindergarten, they scored substantially below the national average (by about 8 points) in their reading scores on the Woodcock-Johnson Tests of Achievement. By the end of the second and third grade, however, they performed essentially at the national average. Reading skills included letter and word recognition as well as reading passage comprehension. In terms of children's math scores, these former Head Start children were more than 15 points below national average during kindergarten, but showed a rapid rise by the end of first grade and continued to advance to levels at and slightly above national average in second and third grade respectively. Math scores reflected children's numerical computational skills and their math problem solving ability. This pattern of positive academic achievement in both math and reading, occurred for children in both treatment conditions.

Reading Scores



In sum, not only did former Head Start children "maintain" any gains that might have resulted from their Head Start experience; in fact, they showed acceleration in the two skill areas -- reading and math--actively taught in early elementary grades. In terms of children's receptive language skills or their vocabulary knowledge, however, the gains were less dramatic and their scores remained lower relative to national norms than in reading and math. ***Collectively, these assessment data provide strong support for the conclusion that Head Start children typically enter school "ready to learn" and that they can achieve academically at national norms.***

Math Scores



TEACHERS, PARENTS, AND CHILDREN REPORT POSITIVE SCHOOL ADJUSTMENT EVERY YEAR

Teachers' ratings of children's academic abilities corresponded moderately well with children's standardized test scores on the individually administered assessments, although teacher ratings of overall academic achievement are somewhat lower than children's test scores in reading and math.

Parents consistently rated their children's school adjustment as very positive from the spring of kindergarten through the end of third grade. Only a small percentage of children (less than 10%) were

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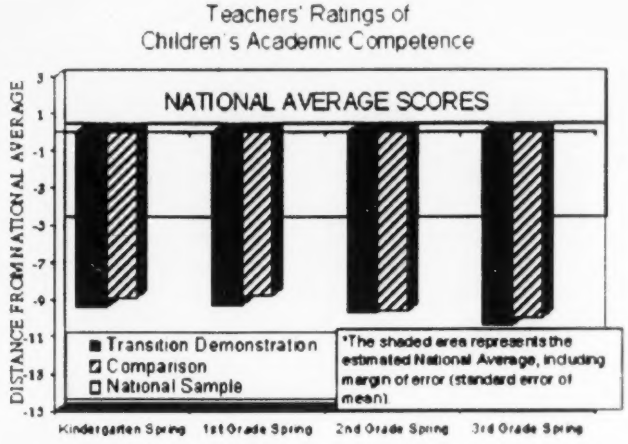
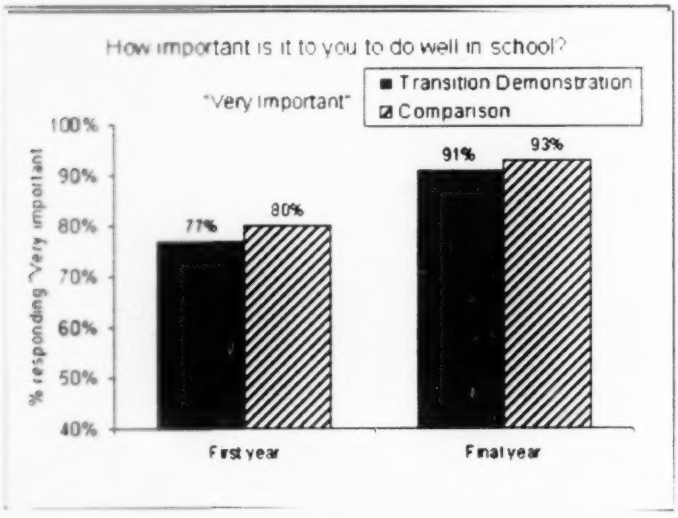
judged to have early school adjustment problems. When former Head Start families encountered problems, they reported these were usually resolved well. Across all years and both treatment groups, parents and children expressed that they highly valued doing well in school.



The children overwhelmingly reported having positive early school experiences. The vast majority like school, value doing well, try hard, report getting along well with teachers and peers, and say they learn a lot from their teachers. In the spring of kindergarten, only 7% of the children reported that they did not like school and thought they were not doing well. For this small group, their early self-report of poor adjustment was predictive of later academic difficulties and higher rates of grade retention and placement in special education, even though their academic and social skills at the time of school entry did not differ significantly from those of other Head Start children.

THE HIGHEST ACHIEVING FORMER HEAD START CHILDREN ARE



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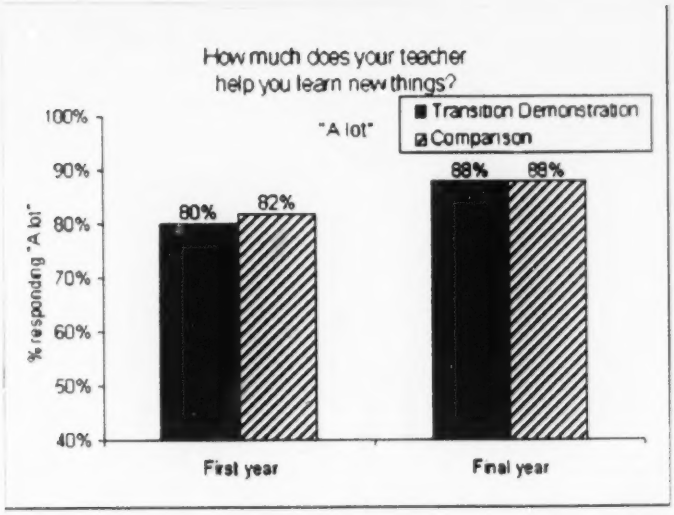
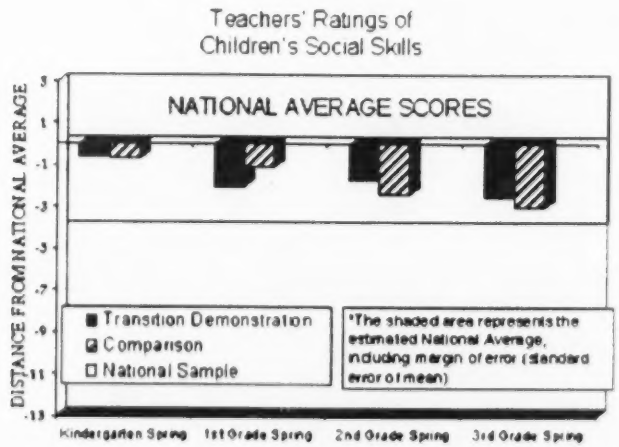


HIGHLY CAPABLE AND COMPETITIVE ACADEMICALLY

Within this multi-site study, the former Head Start children with the highest levels of academic skills (the top 3%) were identified. These children earned reading and math standardized scores that placed them in the 98th percentile nationally. These children were more likely to have families with somewhat higher resource levels, fewer stressors, and parents who endorsed more responsive and non-restrictive parenting styles than did other Head Start families. These academically talented former Head Start children represent an important group who are likely to benefit from increased early learning and language opportunities, as well as other academic enrichment activities.

CHILDREN'S SOCIAL SKILLS ARE RATED POSITIVELY FOR THE VAST MAJORITY OF FORMER HEAD START CHILDREN

For many years, Head Start programs have strongly supported the social and emotional development of children. In kindergarten, these former Head Start children showed positive social and behavioral adjustment, essentially at national norms, based on ratings by both teachers and parents. Over the first four years in school, teachers continued to rate children's social skills positively close to national averages.


Teachers' Ratings of Children's Social Skills
NATIONAL AVERAGE SCORES
DISTANCE FROM NATIONAL AVERAGE
Transition Demonstration
Comparison
National Sample
*The shaded area represents the estimated National Average, including margin of error (standard error of mean)
Kindergarten Spring
1st Grade Spring
2nd Grade Spring
3rd Grade Spring

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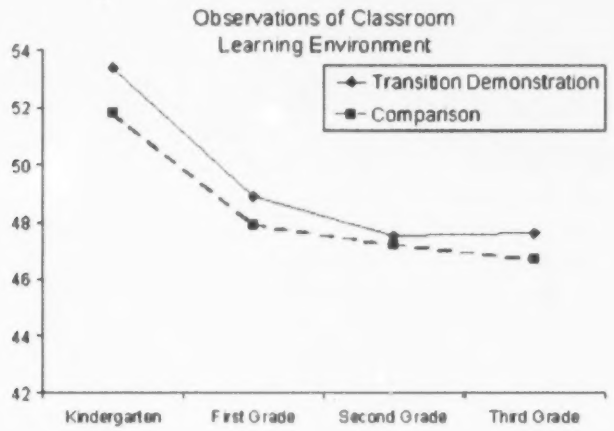
CLASSROOMS AND SCHOOLS OFFERED MANY SPECIAL "TRANSITION SUPPORTS" TO CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

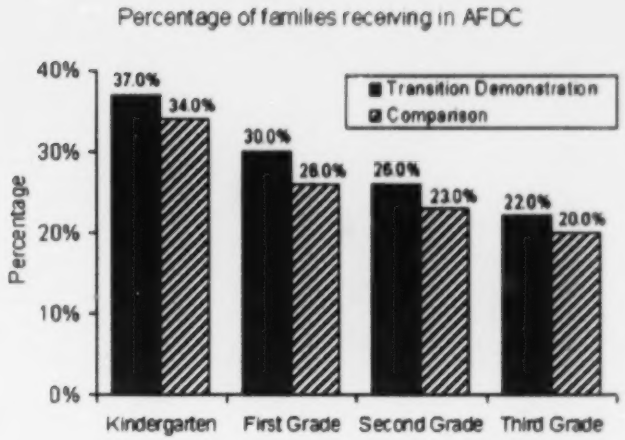
Observations of Classroom
Learning Environment Teachers and principals reported that their schools offered many special supports and activities to promote positive transition-to-school experiences for children from low income families. Schools and classrooms participating in the Transition Demonstration Program showed some significant, although small, differences relative to those in the Comparison group. Specifically, there were slightly higher levels of developmentally appropriate practices observed in the Transition Demonstration classrooms, more parent involvement activities of a non-traditional nature, and increased use of certain transition supports as reported by principals.



It is noteworthy that many schools and classrooms, in both the Transition Demonstration and Comparison groups, had multiple transition supports in place, such as communication between Head Start programs and the public schools prior to a child entering kindergarten and multi-year continuity in the educational curriculum. Parents in both the Transition Demonstration and Comparison schools had highly favorable impressions of their school climate, as did teachers and principals.

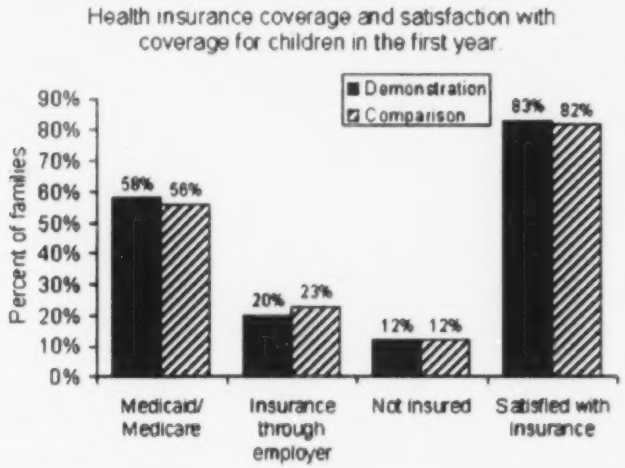
MANY FORMER HEAD START FAMILIES STEADILY DECREASED IN THEIR NEED FOR PUBLIC ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS

In the kindergarten year, about 37% of these former Head Start families received some federal cash assistance (AFDC), Over the next four years, about 25% of these families became economically self-sufficient and no longer received AFDC. (Note: This was before the Welfare Reform legislation of 1996.) Similarly, about the same percentage decline occurred for families living in public or subsidized housing. Further, the percentage of families reporting they had unmet social, health, or employment needs declined from about 28% when their child entered kindergarten to less than 17% at the end of third grade. Each year, about 20-25% of the families reported an increase in their family's income. This pattern of increased self-sufficiency appeared for families in both the Transition Demonstration and Comparison groups.



HEALTH CARE IS RATED POSITIVELY BY FORMER HEAD START FAMILIES

When these former Head Start children entered kindergarten, more than 85% of their families reported that they had adequate health care insurance, including Medicaid for nearly 60%. Further, they are well satisfied with the quality of health care they receive. This positive appraisal of the health care received and the overall health status of former Head Start children continues throughout the first four years of school. More than 77% of the children are rated as having "excellent" or "very good" health, with only 6% having chronic or serious health care conditions that interfere with their full participation in school programs. (Note: the study sample included the 10% of former Head Start children who had disabilities identified before they entered public school.)

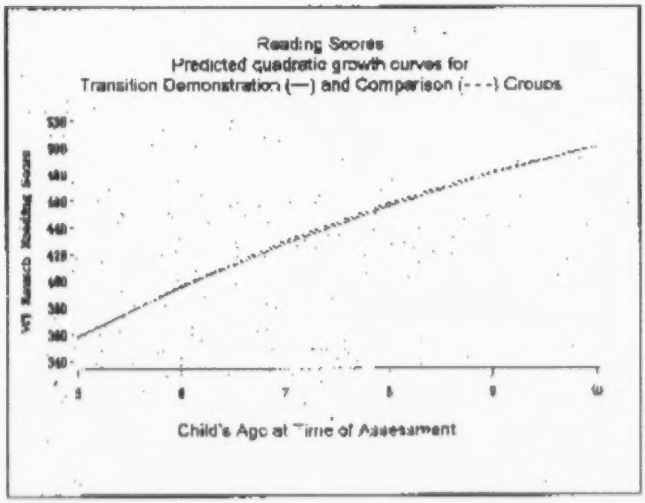


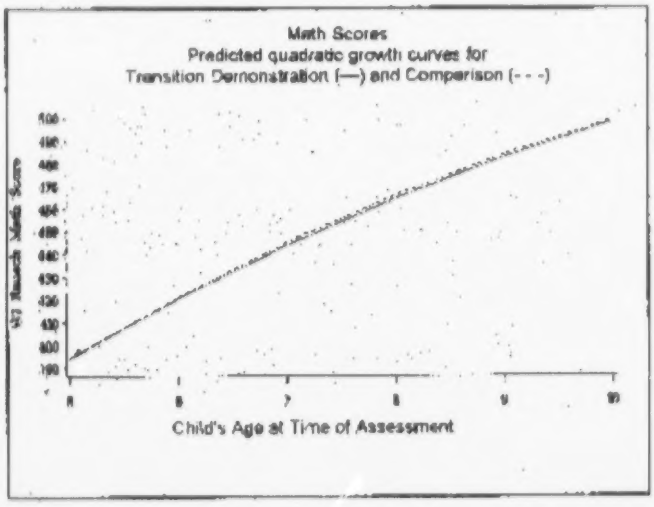
MATERNAL DEPRESSION IS A SIGNIFICANT FACTOR FOR MANY FAMILIES LIVING IN POVERTY

Despite the overall well-being of the children, somewhat more than 40% of the primary caregivers (mostly mothers) were screened positive for depressive symptomatology when their children enter kindergarten. About 19% of the mothers reported continued, chronic problems with depression when their children were completing third grade.

In addition, a subgroup of approximately 3% of these former Head Start families reported that the primary caregiver suffered major health problems sufficient to interfere with their ability to provide routine support for their children's learning and participation in school-related activities. The need to consider the well-being of the child's primary caregiver, particularly mental health services, is important, especially during this transition to school period.

OUTCOMES FOR THE TRANSITION DEMONSTRATION GROUP DIFFERED IN ONLY VERY SMALL WAYS FROM THOSE OF THE COMPARISON GROUP


Reading Scores
Predicted quadratic growth curves for
Transition Demonstration (—) and Comparison (- - -) Groups
Child's Age at Time of Assessment


Math Scores
Predicted quadratic growth curves for
Transition Demonstration (—) and Comparison (- - -)
Child's Age at Time of Assessment

Using complex statistical models of growth curves and hierarchical linear modeling of children's academic and social development from kindergarten through the first four years in public school, a few statistically significant differences were detected between those in the Transition Demonstration versus Comparison groups. These differences appeared for aspects of the children's growth in reading and math skills, although the magnitude was so small as to be considered, by conventional standards, non-consequential.

At least three factors may have contributed to the fact that participants in the Transition Demonstration Program showed limited benefits relative to the comparison group. *First*, only one-fifth of the Transition

Demonstration Programs were implemented at consistently high levels, while most were either moderate or uneven in their quality and intensity and more than one-fourth were weak. *Second*, the Comparison schools often enacted additional programs and supports that essentially mimicked those in the Transition Demonstration group. In fact, the philosophy guiding this Congressionally supported program was widely endorsed at the community level and many of the Comparison schools sought outside funding to offer special supports to former Head Start children and parents. *Third*, the children in both the Transition Demonstration and Comparison groups appeared to benefit tremendously from their school experiences. The vast majority of children earned high marks for positive school adjustment as indicated by: scoring at national averages in their reading and math abilities, having social skills rated positively by teachers and by parents, and their parents and the children themselves reporting that children liked school and were doing well.

Many exploratory and confirmatory analyses were conducted to better understand these findings. Analyses of individual sites indicated that the children in one treatment group sometimes performed slightly higher and showed greater gains than did those in the other, although these differences tended to be very small in magnitude, not necessarily stable across years, and not consistently favoring either the Transition Demonstration or Comparison group. Further, more than one-third of the children changed schools at least once. At some sites, over half of the children moved at least once in the first four years of school. This high mobility limited the number of children and families at each site who received the full "dose" of the planned Transition Demonstration Program and prevented testing the maximum benefits for some children and families.

SUMMARY

The National Head Start-Public School Early Childhood Transition Demonstration Program was implemented in 31 sites to varying degrees in terms of quality and intensity of supports and services provided to children, families, and schools. ***All sites reported they strongly valued the program and many instituted aspects of the program for continuation beyond the funding period.*** Many of the innovative activities and programs enacted have the potential for use in other schools, particularly those that:

1. seek to make schools more welcoming to low income families,
2. improve the quality of classroom instruction for young children,
3. show appreciation for cultural and linguistic diversity of children and families,
4. guide parents in how to support their children's learning at home,
5. afford parents expanded and non-traditional ways of becoming involved with their children's schools, and
6. create strong community-based partnerships to streamline and enhance the social and health service supports to low income families and children.

After only two or three years in public school, the vast majority of former Head Start children are achieving essentially at national averages – a significant gain over their skills when they entered kindergarten. ***This study clearly refutes the longstanding view of a "fade-out effect" of benefits for Head Start children.***

The children overwhelmingly reported they liked school, got along well with teachers and peers, and tried to do their best in school, reflecting the strong values that their parents and the children themselves placed on the importance of school. Some of the children showed remarkable academic talent, while others required special education placement and/or repeated a grade, usually due to a combination of poor social and academic progress.

These former Head Start families generally showed annual improvements in their living conditions, steadily relying less on government support programs. Whether this remarkably encouraging picture of thousands of former Head Start children extends to the nation as a whole -- especially to communities that did not participate in this special federal program or that are not actively seeking to foster partnerships with Head Start programs -- is not known.

The portrayal of the remarkably positive school adjustment of these former Head Start children is in marked contrast to earlier reports that these children "lose the gains" from their Head Start experiences. Although these positive outcomes cannot be ascribed clearly to any single aspect of treatment or even strongly to the Transition Demonstration program itself, there was clear evidence that community partnerships were strengthened and that multiple transition supports were enacted in most of these sites to promote the early school adjustment of children who begin school with economic and other challenges in their families and communities.

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